

Polycentrism and the Terminology of Polity in Early Israel

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Abstract

The southern Levant has a history of persistent polycentrism, the existence of multiple and dispersed centers of autonomous social and political power. This was no less the case in Israel during the pre-monarchic and early-monarchic periods. The structure of society and polity in early Israel matched this polycentric context, and this is reflected in the particular terminology of polity that appears in the biblical books that narrate this period. The present essay seeks to review and discuss this terminology and to show how reflective it is of polycentric environment.

Introduction

Most if not the vast majority of scholars of ancient Israel live in a context of what may be called political ‘unicentrism’, in which political and administrative power has been pulled towards one single center or entity. In Western nations such as the United States or Germany (not to mention the State of Israel itself) from which so many of these scholars hail, central governments with large bureaucracies located in single national capitals own and exercise the largest share of legislative and regulatory authority. It is somewhat natural therefore to assume that the ancient kingdoms of the Near East like Israel should resemble modern states and possess their characteristics. This in turn has fueled assumptions about how such a kingdom should be ‘discoverable’ in the archaeological record (Thomas forthcoming a; forthcoming b).

The contrasting context may be called political ‘polycentrism’, in which power is pulled away from a single center and into multiple dispersed centers. This can be the case even within a single polity, like a kingdom,¹ in which a significant share of power and influence resides with many different centers that make up that polity. Polycentrism can also describe a situation in which the populations of a given region tend to resist power over them being accrued by a single controlling center. Instead, multiple local centers retain

¹ Here the term ‘polity’ is used to refer to a political entity in general, a political entity which may fit into one or more of a number of different categories including a state, kingdom or tribe.

independent power and the region does not become truly unified politically. Archaeological work in the southern Levant and study of its political history over the *longue durée* demonstrate that unlike in Mesopotamia and Egypt (see below), polycentrism has typified this region throughout its history, including the biblical period. This incipient polycentrism had a deep impact on the cultural production of Levantine societies over this long time span, both in terms of their localized material culture but also the concepts they used to give meaning and structure to aspects of life and organization (LaBianca 2009). The focus of this essay is on the interlinked symbols and terminology employed in such a polycentric context to understand social and political relationships, especially across both more and less local spaces.

One of best historical windows onto this situation is provided by the Hebrew Bible, especially the narratives of Israel's social and political history in the books of Judges, 1-2 Samuel and 1 Kings, covering the period from the tribes' independent existence to their incorporation within the monarchy. Because the biblical text tells this story from within, it reveals the internal Israelite terminology for political units and the manner of political relationships between them (Fleming 2012). The point of this essay is to demonstrate how effectively such terminology maps onto the polycentric nature of political power in early Israel. Following this introduction, the first section offers a brief overview of the problem of political polycentrism versus the push to unicentrism in the historical Levant and wider Near East. The second section turns to the matter of terminology and how the language that is native to ancient Israel reveals the context-specific nature of social and political relationships there. The concluding section discusses how this terminology maps onto a socially and politically polycentric world.

Polycentrism and Unicentrism in and around Israel

The adage that “all politics is local” is perhaps no more appropriate to any place than it is to the ancient Near East. To a large extent this derives from the nature of society and social structure, as political and social relations are always intertwined, even today. Social structure was fundamentally constructed around the fact and symbol of the household. At the most local level individuals were members of an actual household comprised of a father, mother, unmarried relatives, servants and children. At broader social levels, the idea of the household also provided the conceptual framework for social relationships. Larger social

units, which would today be referred to as clans and tribes, were also understood as households, made up of a group of lesser households related by kinship. Kingdoms were ultimately just the highest level of such a household-based social organization, so that it constituted one great household made up of smaller household-based kinship units. The language of social relationships in the household operated across every level. The king was understood as the ‘father’ of his domain, the heads of the smaller kinship units that made up his kingdom were his ‘sons’ or ‘servants’, and so on (Schloen 2001). There is a strong sense within the ancient Near East then that polities are made up of smaller and more local units of political power and authority, or polycentrism, and are tied together first and foremost through truly personal relationships. This will be important when considering the native terminology employed in the Hebrew Bible and its reflection of polycentrism.

In a context in which larger polities are built out of smaller ones and are tied together by such personal relationships, this places a lot of onus upon the personality and political skills of the ruler, particularly a king. Similarly for authority figures at the more local level, their own magnetism could ensure they maintained a great degree of control over local affairs. Large archives of correspondence from the Middle Bronze Age Mesopotamian kingdom of Mari demonstrate that the kings of Mari were constantly negotiating with two large tribal confederacies that made up the kingdom, and by no means ruled over them as an absolute “oriental despot”. Instead these tribes, made up of both sedentary and pastoral-nomadic elements, retained a large degree of autonomy from the royal administration, especially the nomads (Fleming 2004). Archaeologists working in Jordan have also argued strongly for a model of the Iron Age kingdoms of Ammon, Moab and Edom that understands them as ‘tribal kingdoms’ not dissimilar to what seems to be taking place in Mari (e.g. LaBianca & Younker 1998; Tyson 2014, with further literature).

If an instance like Mari reflects one end of the spectrum between polycentrism and unicentrism, then Egypt would reflect the other end, but in many ways Egypt is the exception that proves the rule. As much as Egypt had its own distinct culture and society which set it apart from its Near Eastern neighbors, it still adhered to the same household-based organization (Lehner 2000). In its periods of unification such as the New Kingdom, Egypt was quite uniceptic, with a great degree of administrative control vested in the pharaonic and priestly administration, who had the wherewithal to call upon labor for several impressive construction projects. But as the noted Egyptologist Jan Assmann notes, “from beneath the monocentric surface of the territorial state dominant in the ‘Kingdom’ phases of

Egyptian history, a polycentric deep structure repeatedly broke through whenever the surface crumbled” (Assmann 1996, p. 84). In the ‘Intermediate’ periods of Egypt’s history, centralized rule broke down and local centers of power reasserted their independence. This was in fact going on during the period of Israel’s early history portrayed in Judges, 1-2 Samuel and 1 Kings; The New Kingdom and its empire in the land of Canaan began to crumble in the course of the 12th century BC, giving way to the Third Intermediate Period by the time of David and Solomon’s kingdom in the 10th century BC. The Third Intermediate Period is marked by the division of the land into multiple local powerbases, in particular the *de jure* Pharaohs ruling from Tanis in the north and the High Priests of Amun in Thebes ruling in the south during the early phase (Taylor 2000).

Indeed, the centuries after the end of Egyptian hegemony could also be regarded as a time of (re)emergent polycentrism in the Levant, and early Israel was part of this. The social and political characteristics of the tribes of Israel reflected in the book of Judges bear a striking resemblance to the small kingdoms and other Canaanite polities who had been vassals of Egypt, as revealed in their correspondence with the Pharaoh’s court found at Amarna. In many instances these polities formed what have recently been called “centralized lands” in which a group of populations (towns, mobile groups, etc.) were ruled by one central settlement and its ruler. In other cases they could form themselves into a “multipolity decentralized land”, where a group of populations retained their independence but formed a loose association that could act in concert when their mutual interests required it. The landscape of the land of Canaan ruled by Egypt was made up of a mosaic of often quite small centralized and multipolity decentralized lands. The pre-monarchic Israel encountered in the book of Judges appears to have been just such a multipolity decentralized land, as the tribes often act in concert while still retaining their autonomy. In the famous in Judges 5 for example, Deborah tells of the tribes of Israel who did and did not join the fight (Benz 2016).

The pull towards polycentrism and the difficulty in maintaining a form of unicentrism is hardly unique to the Near East in its ancient iteration, in fact it has remained a factor until quite recently. Even late into Ottoman rule in the Levant, the Arab tribes (who again constituted both settled and mobile elements) had a complex and often downright hostile relationship with the Sultan’s government. The tribes ranged across large swathes of territory and often resisted the control of central authority, especially census and taxation. Local tribal sheikhs and other leaders like the Majali clan in Kerak had considerable control over the affairs of their territories. Ottoman land reforms during the 19th century were an

attempt to establish more government control, but often succeeded in reinforcing the power of the sheikhs (van der Steen 2013).

So what, briefly, are the dynamics involved in polycentrism and unicentrism? These can be divided into what have been called “centripetal forces” and “centrifugal forces”. The former describes a factor, policy or effort that draws power towards a single center, either naturally or deliberately. The latter describes the opposite, pushing out against the single center and drawing power towards multiple local centers. Geography, for instance, can act either a centripetal or centrifugal force. In the case of Egypt the concentration of civilization along the single navigable axis of Nile river aided centralization, though as pointed out above even this did not override the inborne polycentrism. In the Levant, on the other hand, the geographic isolation caused by the regions rugged mountain country and deserts greatly aided the formation of multiple separate of often autonomous polities like tribes, be the they the Arab tribes under the Ottomans in Transjordan or the Israelite tribes in the hill country of Canaan. The State of Israel, however, has taken up policies towards the Bedouin populations that it inherited which could be regarded as centripetal, namely, to try to integrate the Bedouin into the state. This has included encouraging them to settle and engage with the state education system (Hartshorne 1950; Meir 1988; LaBianca 2019; LaBianca forthcoming).

As persistent as polycentrism appears to have been in the ancient Near East and certainly in the Levant, this does not mean that political centralization could not be achieved under the right circumstances, only that a push towards the more unicentric end of the spectrum was not a simple matter or easy to maintain. It is important therefore to understand both how polities were formed as smaller individuals that made up a polycentric world and the way it was that they could become bound together to form a larger and potentially more centralized entity. This means serious consideration of the native sociological context and the terminology is use.

The Terminology of Polity in Early Israel

The purpose of this section is to review and discuss the terminology related to polity in those biblical books already listed that cover the immediate pre-monarchic period of the Israelite tribes in the land and the transition to the early monarchy under David and Solomon. For the purposes of chronological and archaeological context, this period covers

approximately the 12th to 10th centuries BC, archaeologically the Iron Age I (c. 1180-980 BC) and early Iron Age IIA (c. 980-900 BC) periods, which followed on from the Late Bronze Age (c. 1550-1200 BC). The point is to demonstrate how much they align with a segmented and ultimately polycentric character of early Israel, even under the monarchy. This review will proceed from smaller to larger entities, though it should be remembered that the exact semantic range of any one term known to the biblical authors cannot always be known for certain now. That having been said, one only need to point to the identification of Achan in chapter 7 of the book of Joshua to see the descending hierarchy of tribe, clan and household (Stager 1985).

The smallest social and political unit that appears in the biblical text is the *בית* 'house'. In many ways it is the most important, since as discussed above the household was the fundamental building block of social and political structure, and its language of relationships (see above) permeated every level of this structure. The use of *בית* appears to be quite flexible, for instance the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh are together referred to as *בית יוסף* 'the House of Joseph' after their mutual ancestor. At an even greater level, a kingdom could be referred with the term *בית*, reflective of its household organisation, with the name of dynastic founder. Thus, the reference to the kingdom of Judah as *בית דוד* 'the House of David' is 1 Kgs 12:19 corresponds with the same use of *בית דוד* in the Aramaic stela from the late 9th century BC found at Tel Dan in northern Israel (see Millard 2003). These broad uses of *בית* in the Hebrew Bible should be understood against the wider background of ancient Near Eastern texts, which reveal that cognate terms in other Semitic languages were used in the same ways. A group of households who claimed descent from a common ancestor constituted the next level of unit, the *משפחה* 'clan'. The clan level seems to have been the basis for important functions of daily life based around kinship at the local level of immediate interpersonal interaction, including sacrifices like those of David's Ephrathite clan in Bethlehem mentioned in 1 Samuel 16 and 20. Military recruitment and conscription was based upon the clan, with males of fighting age gathered into a single *אלף* 'company', a term that only later took on the numeric connotation of 'one thousand'. David's brothers serve in just a clan based company when fighting as part of Saul's army in 1 Samuel 17 (Schloen 2001).

A less remarked-upon aspect of social structure of Israel involves terms which are typically associated with physical settlements, especially the term *עיר*, commonly translated as 'city'. Such translations tend to invoke an image of the physical settlement, and while this

is certainly part of the meaning of עיר, there appears to be a correlation between settlements of different sizes, what might now be called cities, towns or villages, and clans. So, the city can act in its sense as a social unit rather than simply a collection of physical dwellings. In 1 Sam 4:12-13, when a Benjaminite comes to inform Shiloh that the Ark has been captured by the Philistines, it is the עיר that cries out in response. When Absalom interrogates those who come to Jerusalem seeking judgement from David in 2 Sam 15:2, he asks which עיר they hail from and they answer by telling him which tribe they belong to; it would make little sense to invoke identity with a larger social unit if the עיר was not a subset of the tribe, equivalent to at least one clan. The sense of the city acting a polity emerges in instances where the heads of its households make decisions and act on its behalf, who were referred to as either the זקנים ‘elders’ or בעלים ‘lords’. In 1 Samuel 11, it is the elders of the city of Jabesh-Gilead who negotiate with the Ammonite king Nahash over the terms of the city’s possible surrender. In 1 Sam 23:11, David suspects that the lords of the town of Keilah, which he and his men had just saved from a Philistine raid, would hand him over to Saul. David knows that it is the town’s leadership who would be responsible for any business with the king of Israel. In Judg 9:1-2, it appears that the clan of Abimelech's maternal relatives does not comprise all of the lords of the city of Shechem, making Shechem an example of a town made up of more than one clan, which as probably the case in other large settlements (Schloen 2001; Thomas 2019).

The sense in which the Hebrew עיר can signify a human community rather than just the physical space in which they live is quite continuous with its Akkadian cognate *ālu*, Sumerian URU. At Mari, the *ālu* appears in the documents as a decision-making political body within the kingdom’s structures of authority (Fleming 2004), while some of the sharpest parallels between the עיר and *ālu* as polities in fact come from the Amarna correspondence. This correspondence reveals that in many cases the Egyptian court was dealing with the individual leader of a city, its elders, or the citizenry as a whole; for example a letter from the city of Irqata in northern Lebanon (EA 100) is addressed from “the city of Irqata and its elders”. The most prolific author of letters to the Egyptian court was the vassal ruler Rib-Addu of the city of Gubla (Byblos), who was eventually driven out by his own citizens; subsequently, the latter took over the communication with Pharaoh in their own name (Benz 2016). So strong is the association between the *ālu* and the population comprising it that it seems the term could even be used to refer to a temporary encampment of pastoral nomads, though this usage is somewhat more obscure (van Driel 2001).

The next largest social unit and polity was the שבט/מטה ‘tribe’, made up of a congregation of clans who claimed descent from a higher common ancestor. In the classic twelve-tribe schema of the people of Israel, these are the sons of Jacob, that is, Israel himself. As noted above, the tribes are portrayed in Judges as quite autonomous actors in the pre-monarchic period, but this would be a major factor in the solidification of the monarchy as well. In some instances they act at least partially in concert against an external enemy as in Judges 5, yet in Judges 12 one finds two of the tribes of Israel acting independently and in fact against each other. Generally it is the elders of the tribes who act on their behalf. It is זקני ישראל ‘the elders of Israel’² who approach Samuel in 1 Sam 8:4 to install a king over them. When David wants to increase his own political stocks after a period of time as a roaming brigand he goes home, offering the spoils of his raids as gifts to the elders of his native tribe of Judah (1 Sam 30:26). After taking up residence in Hebron, Judah’s main settlement, these elders come to David and anoint him as king over the tribe, here referred to as בית יהודה ‘the House of Judah’ (2 Sam 2:4). Later, after the House of Saul had been extinguished, the elders of the tribes of Israel who had made up his kingdoms come and agree a covenant with David, anointing them king over him (2 Sam 5:3). These instances in the text refer to the social reality of David’s kingdom, that it was a level of social structure made up of a segmented series of smaller and smaller social units based on the ties of lineage and held together through the idea of the household (Thomas 2019).

Before moving on to discuss the kingdom, it is also worth discussing another term for an apparent social unit, that of the ‘land’. As mentioned above, the land was a type of polity that appears in the Amarna archives prominently among the Late Bronze Age Canaanite vassals of Egypt. The term commonly translated as ‘land’ there is the Akkadian *mātu*, Sumerian KUR, so for example one finds reference to the “land of Irqata”, a group of towns and communities administered from the city of Irqata mentioned above (EA 139). As with the translation of ‘city’ then, the translation of ‘land’ does not really capture the fact that it is human community that is being referred to as much as or even more so than a plot of territory (Benz 2016). Judging by a few instances in the biblical books of interest here, it

² This likely excludes Judah based upon the distinctions between Israel and Judah that come through in the text, though Judah may well have been associated with Israel as a decentralized polity quite early on. The matter of the early social-political relationship between Judah and Israel is a complex question, one that cannot be answered here, but suffice it to observe that the biblical text pulls in different directions in different places; David’s brothers fight in an company as part of the army of Israel under Saul, but the distinction between the kingship of Israel and the kingship of Judah is maintained throughout David’s reign in 2 Samuel.

seems that the land was still an active type of polity in early Israel, though it was always marked as clearly as in the Amarna correspondence. One clearer instance to point at is David's capture of Jerusalem in 2 Samuel 5, when David and his men come to Jerusalem and at the same time to the Jebusites who dwelt in הארץ 'the land'. The Jebusites were acknowledged as one of the people groups who inhabited the hill-country into which the Israelites had entered (e.g. Num 13:29), and it is not a stretch of the imagination to understand the land referred to here as continuous from the KUR URU *Ú-ru-sa-lim* 'land of the city of Jerusalem' in the Amarna correspondence (EA 287), still inhabited by the same local population of the area from the Late Bronze Age.

For another quite clear example, consider the ארץ הפר 'land of Hephher' which forms part of the third of Solomon's so-called "districts" (1 Kgs 4:10). Hephher appears in Josh 12:17 as a Canaanite city whose king was defeated by Joshua and the Israelites, and its location has been plausibly identified with the site of Tell el-Muhaffar on the northern edge of the Dothan Valley, in the northernmost part of the hill-country (Zertal 2004). Interestingly, Hephher is also the name of one of the clans of the tribe of Manasseh who settled in the same part of the hill-country. The eponymous ancestor of this clan is the father of Zelophehad, who had no sons but only daughters. Moses had promised them part of the allotment of the tribe, a promise fulfilled by Joshua (Num 26:33; Josh 17:2-4). The names of two of these daughters, Noah and Hoglah appear in the cache of 8th century BC ostraca found at Samaria, which appear to record shipments of products from the clans of Manasseh into the royal capital of the Kingdom of Israel. The names of some of the clans mentioned alongside Hephher in Josh 17:2 appear in the ostraca, but not Hephher itself. The name of one of the other daughters, Tirza, was also the name of an important settlement in the northern hill country, identified with Tell el-Farah. It is likely then that the land of Hephher was originally a centralized *mātu* of the Late Bronze Age, which included these outlying towns and was then incorporated into the social structure of the Israelite tribe of Manasseh by making Hephher the ancestor of one of its clans (Schloen 2001; Thomas 2019; Zertal 1992).³

It appears then that the 'land' was still a viable term for a type of polity in early Israel, part of its striking degree of social and political inheritance from the world of Late Bronze Age Canaan. It is also one of the terms involved with what might be considered to be

³ This would indicate that ארץ could be used in the social and political sense in which Akkadian *mātu* is used in the Amarna correspondence, but one should recognize that the term certainly has a broader range of uses in the Hebrew Bible.

the highest level of social unit and polity, usually understood as the kingdom. Although this does seem to be the case, the terminology here was at least somewhat flexible. Terms relating to kingdom and kingship derive from the root מלך 'to reign, rule as king, be king' etc., hence in Nathan's announcement to David of YHWH's promise of an everlasting dynasty (2 Samuel 7) it is the ממלכה 'kingdom, kingship' which is established forever. It is important to recognize that this very much ties the existence of the kingdom as a polity to the person of the king himself, such that the kingdom is at its core the personal exercise of the powers and responsibilities of kingship. A kingdom as the citizens of early Israel would have understood it was a series of personal relationships of authority, not an impersonal order imposed from above in the sense of the modern state (Thomas forthcoming b).

Observe however how verses like 2 Sam 7:11 express the homology between kingdom and house, for as noted above they were understood to be one and the same, such that the king was the *paterfamilias* of his domain, so that בית appears in the names of kingdoms like David's. As already noted, Judah is referred to as the House of Judah when its elders act on its behalf to appoint David as its king in 2 Sam 2:4, and indeed the term ארץ יהודה also appears in a few places that may have the connotation of a polity rather than being purely geographic (e.g. 1 Sam 30:16).⁴ Yet when Judg 20:1 informs that "all the sons of Israel came out, from Dan to Beersheba, including the land of Gilead (ארץ הגלעד) and assembled like one man to YHWH at Mizpah", the sense of the land of Gilead as a polity which constituted part of the community of Israel is stronger. It was certainly not unknown in the ancient Near East for a kingdom to be referred to as a land, for example the kingdom of Assyria was always known as the *māt Aššur*, but such usage is less obviously present in the Hebrew Bible; the term ארץ ישראל is relatively uncommon outside of the late books of Chronicles and Ezra. The upshot is simply that there is certain fluidity of terminology at this level, such that a kingdom can also be referred to as a house or a land, and a tribe such as Judah, which could also be known as a house or a land, can appoint for itself a king. But it was more common for consolidated kingdoms to be composed of multiple larger social units like lands and tribes, which is indeed the case with David's and Solomon's kingdom.

Conclusion

⁴ The most obvious sense of the term 'land of Judah' as a polity occurs in the Greek of 1 Kgs 4:19, where like the land of Hephher it forms part of one of Solomon's so-called "districts". יהודה is missing from the Hebrew text, but the Greek most likely represents the more original reading.

As can be seen from the foregoing review, the terminology for polity in early Israel reveals its very fractal and segmentary nature, in which larger units are typically composed of smaller ones. Centres of social and political authority exist at the most local level, that of the actual household family unit. That social unit was in turn a building block into the larger units of clan, city, land, tribe and kingdom. This makes sense for polycentric world, because it provides a basis by which local communities at both individual and collective levels could exist as their own autonomous centres of authority. This was especially important and natural in contexts like early Israel where communication and therefore co-ordinational activities like resource-sharing and joint military action was limited by factors like geography. As observed in the introduction, the result for the southern Levant in both the Iron Age and over the span of the *longue durée* has been that while polycentrism and decentralization has remained a constant, efforts to push towards centralization and unicentrism have constituted a challenge (LaBianca 2009).

The narratives of early Israel in the pre-monarchic and early monarchic periods in Judges, 1-2 Samuel and 1 Kings are a particularly valuable window onto this polycentrism because not only do they provide the native terminology for the different levels of social structure, but they also allow one to understand how the meaning and usage and the nature of the social units they reference were embedded within their particular sociological context. Put simply, these narratives offer not only concepts but concepts in action. Moreover, they provide a window onto the native social and political mechanism that facilitated the construction of larger social units – first out of households into clans, and then all the way up to the kingdom. As in the wider world of the ancient Near East, this mechanism was the symbol of the household itself, whose relationships of authority and their associated terminology were applied across these smaller and larger structures to provide the social and political glue that held them together (Schloen 2001).

Finally, the narratives retelling the history of the monarchy's formation, development and ultimate division are quite revealing with regard to the challenges and potential pitfalls of attempting centralization. When the elders of Israel come to Samuel to request a king, Samuel first gives them a lengthy warning about how kingship will come to deeply effect the lives of the communities that made up the nation (1 Sam 8:11-17). Samuel emphasizes especially how the independence and self-reliance of the Israelites will be eroded by kingship, because it will be necessary for them to either serve the king's purposes or surrender their resources to him. What Samuel is describing is nothing less than the

centralization and accrual of power that a king will enact, and his warning proves to be well-founded as this is indeed what plays out under the early monarchy. This is especially the case with Solomon, with his institution of a system of twelve divisions, which served to collect the taxes and tithes from the different social units that made up his domain and to administer a system or *corvée* labour, and this labour Solomon puts to use in construction projects like the Temple in Jerusalem (1 Kings 4, 6-8). As a central national shrine closely associated with the ruling dynasty, located right next to the royal palace after all, the Temple was supposed to allow for centralized control over the cultic affairs of Israel. As it turned out, this move towards unicentrism met its end when that persistent polycentrism fought back: when Solomon's son Rehoboam refuses to lift the imposition over the northern tribes of Israel, they re-assert the autonomy they had enjoyed as a decentralized coalition by severing ties with the House of David (Benz 2016; Thomas 2019).

This article has offered a review of terminology of polity in early Israel, and has sought to enliven understanding of its ancient social context by placing it against the background of the persistent polycentrism of ancient and more recent southern Levant. It can be concluded, then, that this terminology maps onto a polycentric context quite neatly, and that considered together, they offer insight into the nature of both this particular social world and the sociology of the southern Levant over the *longue durée*.

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